MIMMA BELLA

By

EUGENE LEE-HAMILTON

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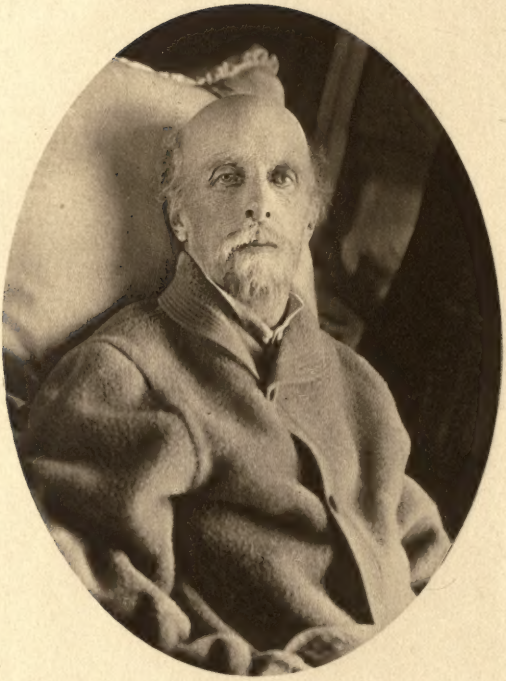

Eugene Lee-Hamilton.

MIMMA BELLA
BY EUGENE LEE-HAMILTON

WITH PORTRAIT

NEW YORK
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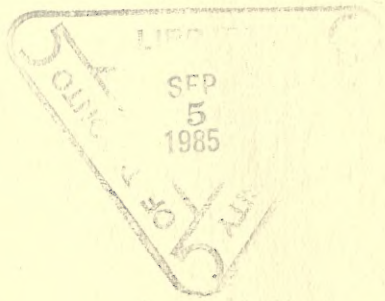

Preface.

IN 1894 a volume entitled "Sonnets of the Wingless Hours" placed Eugene Lee-Hamilton indisputably among the masters of the sonnet.

Not until this book had captured the critics was it known that the writer of so many distinguished volumes of verse had been lying for twenty years in the twilight of a cruel and mysterious malady.

The sonnets were a cry from the living grave in which his youth had been buried.

He had written:

"And now my manhood goes where goes the song
Of captive birds, the cry of crippled things;
It goes where goes the day that unused dies.
The cage is narrow, and the bars are strong,
In which my restless spirit beats its wings;
And round me stretch unfathomable skies."

Thus it seemed no less than miraculous when, after twenty years, Eugene Lee-Hamilton rose from that living grave to take his place again in the world of men.

Youth was gone beyond recall; but hope came to him, and, after a while, love; and still later the promise of a bright young life to retrieve the lost years.

The promise ended in denial, the pain of which called forth a more poignant cry, the sonnet sequence "Mimma Bella; In Memory of a Little Life."

Eugene Lee-Hamilton was born in London in 1845. He lost his father early, and his mother, a woman of marked

force and individuality, superintended his education under tutors in France and Germany.

At nineteen he went to Oriel College, Oxford, where he took the Taylorian Scholarship for Modern Languages and Literature.

He entered the Diplomatic Service in 1869, and after a term in the Foreign Office was attached to the British Embassy at Paris.

He served three years under Lord Lyons, and in 1871 went to Geneva as interpreter for the Alabama Arbitration.

During the changes necessitated by the Franco-German War and the Commune he accompanied the Embassy to Tours, Bordeaux, and Versailles.

He was appointed to the Legation at Lisbon in 1873; and here illness shattered an always delicate constitution. Anæmia and alarming disturbances of the circulation showed themselves ; and he left Lisbon in a semi-paralysed condition that gave no hope of recovery. His brief and distinguished diplomatic career was ended.

They took him to Florence, to the wheeled bed on which he was to lie night and day for twenty years.

The heavy gloom of those wingless hours was lightened by his mother's devotion, and the loving companionship of his brilliant young half-sister, later to be known in literature as Vernon Lee.

After a while friends could be seen ; and soon names distinguished in literature, art, politics, gathered round the brother and sister. The room where he spent the afternoon in the intervals of suffering became in those days one of the most notable centres in the intellectual life of Florence.

Then, little by little, he could bear to be read to; he could dictate a fragment of verse, the sextet of a sonnet,

sometimes one line only. And so he built his books. He tells us himself what poetry meant to him in those terrible years.

"I think the fairies to my christening came;
But they were wicked sprites, and envious elves
Who brought me gall as bitter as themselves
In tiny tankards wrought with fairy flame.

They wished me love of books—each little dame—
With power to read no book upon my shelves;
Fair limbs for numbness, Dead Sea fruit by twelves,
And every bitter blessing you can name.

But one good elf there was, and she let fall
A single drop of Poesy's wine of gold
In every little tankard full of gall.

So year by year, as woes and pains grow old,
The little golden drop is in them all;
But bitterer is the cup than can be told."

In 1878 he published his first volume, "Poems and Transcripts." This was followed in 1880 by "Gods, Saints, and Men"; and then, at wide distances, by "The New Medusa," "Apollo and Marsyas," "Imaginary Sonnets," "The Fountain of Youth," and "Sonnets of the Wingless Hours."

The "Sonnets of the Wingless Hours" (1894) were to be the last of the series written in helplessness. There were signs of a change in the disease. Slowly and gradually movement came back. In 1896 the prisoner was free and restored to the outer world. His delight in life, birds, trees, sunshine,

was pathetic and very beautiful. Everything was new to him. It was a boy's soul looking out of the eyes of fifty years. He was eager for new experiences, new scenes and countries. He went to Canada and the United States.

It was soon after his return that I met him in Florence, in 1897, and the following year we were married.

In 1900 we moved out from Florence to the Villa Benedettini, among the olives on the hill-slope above the city.

He was a charming host, a brilliant *causeur*, and the grey old villa was soon alive with social and literary activity. My husband's translation of Dante's "Inferno" had already appeared, as well as a little volume of poems, "Forest Notes," which we had written together in the New Forest during the honeymoon. Now he set to work on the "Purgatorio."

He compiled a selection from his poems for the "Canterbury Poets" series; and wrote two novels, "The Lord of the Dark Red Star" and "The Romance of the Fountain."

In 1903 our little girl was born. We called her Persis—"The Beloved"; but the kindly Italians rechristened her "Mimma Bella" (the Beautiful Baby), and she became Mimma Bella to us all.

The child filled her father's life; it was almost as if she gave him back something of what he had lost.

Every morning he worked beside her cot at his translation, or at his new tragedy, "Ezelin"; every evening he wove rhymes for her, walking up and down the long room carrying her.

His only lyrics now were the songs he made and sang to her; his only verses the nonsense rhymes he recited while she sat, charmed, on his knee.

He never wearied of planning her life, dreaming of her

future. The best of earth was to be stored and poured out for her.

The dream lasted nearly two years. In 1904 she died.

He had dipped his pen in delicate fancy to write on the death of Puck. He dipped it now in his heart's blood to write his child's elegy. When "Mimma Bella" was written his work was done; for life had dealt him too hard a blow, and his strength was spent.

Weakness and depression culminated in a stroke of paralysis; and after months of tragic suffering death came.

He died at Villa Pierotti, Bagni di Lucca, on September 7, 1907; and was brought to Florence to lie beside his mother and his child.

And now on June nights, when the fireflies sparkle among the olives in the lonely villa garden, I see another garden where they flash about the laurels and the cypresses and the crowding graves, lighting the bronze letters that plead softly, "Greet Persis the Beloved."

ANNIE LEE-HAMILTON.

VILLA BENEDETTINI, FLORENCE,
November 1908.

Contents.

Preface : p. v.
The Weaving of the Sonnets : p. 1.
Mimma Bella : p. 3.
Last Sonnets : p. 61.

The Weaving of the Sonnets.

As in the banner'd and emblazon'd room
Of some great feudal keep, in days of old,
White queenly fingers wrought in cloth of gold
Fantastic patterns on a royal loom ;
Wrought tendril, magic leaf, and lily bloom
Where dragon, lynx, and pawing pard were scroll'd,
Or those strange roses sainted queens behold
Who, pale hands folded, sleep in minster gloom :

So Fancy works upon the frame of Time
Her pageantry with gold eternal rays
Into the web of even fate and odd,
Till gleams some sonnet, where a hem of rhyme
Borders such dream-shapes as, for angel gaze,
Shine, in the pattern on the Stole of God.

Mimma Bella.
In Memory of a Little Life.
I.

Have dark Egyptians stolen thee away,
O Baby, Baby, in whose cot we peer
As down some empty gulf that opens sheer
And fathomless, illumined by no ray ?

And wilt thou come, on some far-distant day,
With unknown face, and say, " Behold ! I'm here,
The child you lost " ; while we in sudden fear,
Dumb with great doubt, shall find no word to say ?

One darker than dark gipsy holds thee fast ;
One whose strong fingers none has forced apart
Since first they closed on things that were too fair ;

Nor shall we see thee other than thou wast,
But such as thou art, printed in the heart,
In changeless baby loveliness still there.

II.

Two springs she saw—two radiant Tuscan springs,
What time the wild red tulips are aflame
In the new wheat, and wreaths of young vine frame
The daffodils that every light breeze swings;

And the anemones that April brings
Make purple pools, as if Adonis came
Just there to die; and Florence scrolls her name
In every blossom Primavera flings.

Now, when the scented iris, straight and tall,
Shall hedge the garden gravel once again
With pale blue flags, at May's exulting call,

And when the amber roses, wet with rain,
Shall tapestry the old grey villa wall,
We, left alone, shall seek one bud in vain.

III.

'Tis March; and on the hills that stretch away
In misty furrows in the growing night
The peasants keep their old Etruscan rite,
And wave strange fires, like will-o'-wisps at play;

Chanting an incantation that shall lay
The spirits that bring drought and hail and blight,
And keeping with the sheaves of straw they light
In the green wheat all demon spite at bay.

Ah me! this spring we have no seed to shield
From Life's dark possibilities of ill;
Nor look we on the hills where wave the fires;

Nor, hopeful as the tillers of the field,
Repeat the words of magic that they still
Intone in March, as did their antique sires.

IV.

If we could know the silent shapes that pass
Across our lives, we should perchance have seen
God's Messenger with dusky pinions lean
Above the cot, and scan as in the glass

Of some clear forest water, framed in grass,
The likeness of his own seraphic mien;
And heard the call, implacably serene,
Of Him Who is, Who will be, and Who was.

O Azraël, why tookest thou the child
'Neath thy great wings, that lock as in a vice,
From all that is alive and warm and fond,

To where a rayless sun that never smiled
Looks down on his own face in the pale ice
Of vast and lifeless seas in the Beyond?

V.

O, rosy as the lining of a shell
Were the wee hands that now are white as snows;
And like pink coral, with their elfin toes,
The feet that on life's brambles never fell.

And with its tiny smile, adorable
The mouth that never knew life's bitter sloes;
And like the incurved petal of a rose
The little ear, now deaf in Death's strong spell.

Now, while the seasons in their order roll,
And sun and rain pour down from God's great dome,
And deathless stars shine nightly overhead,

Near other children, with her little doll,
She waits the wizard that will never come
To wake the sleep-struck playground of the dead.

VI.

What wast thou, little baby, that art dead—
A one day's blossom that the hoar-frost nips?
A bee that's crushed, the first bright day it sips?
A small dropped gem that in the earth we tread?

Or cherub's smiling gold-encircled head,
That Death from out Life's painted missal rips?
Or murmured prayer that barely reached the lips?
Or sonnet's fair first line—the rest unsaid?

O, 'tis not hard to find what thou wast like;
The world is full of fair unfinished things
That vanish like a dawn-admonished elf.

Life teems with opening forms for Death to strike;
The woods are full of unfledged broken wings;
Enough for us, thou wast thy baby self.

VII.

We found a baby tortoise, whose green shell
Seemed carved by elfin hands; whose feet and head
Peeped shy and tiny on the garden bed
That was the world wherein God bade it dwell.

We watched it for some mornings. Then befell
The cruelty of Fate. The careless tread
Of some unconscious foot: and lo, 'twas dead;
While Nature coldly smiled, and said: "All's well."

All's well?—O God, why bring into the world
A living thing, whose smallest dainty parts
Exceed man's nicest art; and then and there,

Tortoise or babe, or blossom half unfurled,
Crush it beneath the fatal foot that starts
None knows from whence, and hurries none knows where?

VIII.

Where Mimma lies, some nameless children sleep,
Whose graves, in the obliterating grass,
Sink slowly, as the empty seasons pass,
And look like waves on Time's slow-heaving deep.

No tears, no flowers ; save when spring-clouds weep
Upon them ; or the breeze with faint " Alas ! "
Brings them stray petals from the flowery mass
Upon some grave that Love and Sorrow keep.

Who were they? No one knows. But theirs this wreath
Of fourteen berries, that a stranger brings
With blossoms for his child that lies beneath.

For Life, their names are faint forgotten things ;
But now, within the larger book of Death,
Their names are written with the names of kings.

IX.

Keep not the sunshine from our Mimma's grave,
Nor screen her memory from the sweet fresh air;
Speak of her still as if she still were here;
Let thought and word around her freely wave.

Give her back now the little smile she gave,
Nor treat her thought as one too sharp to bear,
But as a thing for ever sweet and fair,
That we would fain from shade and silence save.

O ye, who stopped and gazed into her face,
And knew her for the dainty babe she was,
Fear not to pain us, uttering her name;

Nor fear to cast the sunlight on the place
Where memory keeps the sweetest thing it has,
As fresh as on the day on which she came.

X.

'Tis Christmas, and we gaze with downbent head
On something that the post has brought too late
To reach thee, Mimma, through the narrow gate,
From one who did not know that thou art dead;

A picture-book, to play with on thy bed;
And we, who should have heard thee laugh and prate
So busily, sit here at war with Fate,
And turn the pages silently instead.

O that I knew thee playing 'neath God's eyes,
With the small souls of all the dewy flowers
That strewed thy grave, and died at Autumn's breath;

Or with the phantom of the doll that lies
Beside thee for Eternity's long hours,
In the dim nursery that men call Death!

XI.

O bless the law that veils the Future's face;
For who could smile into a baby's eyes,
Or bear the beauty of the evening skies,
If he could see what cometh on apace?

The ticking of the death-watch would replace
The baby's prattle for the over-wise;
The breeze's murmur would become the cries
Of stormy petrels where the breakers race.

We live as moves the walker in his sleep,
Who walks because he sees not the abyss
His feet are skirting as he goes his way:

If we could see the morrow from the steep
Of our security, the soul would miss
Its footing, and fall headlong from to-day.

XII.

Mantled in purple dusk, Imperial Death,
Thy throne Time's mist, thy crown the clustered stars,
Thy orb the world;—did Nature's countless wars
Yield insufficient incense for thy breath?

Hadst not enough with all who troop beneath
Thy inward-opening gates, whose shadowy bars
Give back nor kings in their triumphal cars,
Nor the worn throngs that old age hurrieth?

O sateless Death, most surely it was thou,
(A thousand ages, yea, and longer still,
Before the words were heard in Galilee)

That saidst with dark contraction of thy brow,
While through all Nature ran an icy chill:
"Now let the little children come to me."

XIII.

One day, I mind me, now that she is dead,
When nothing warned us of the dark decree,
I crooned, to lull her, in a minor key,
Such fancies as first came into my head.

I crooned them low, beside her little bed;
And the refrain was somehow "Come with me,
And we will wander by the purple sea";
I crooned it, and—God help me!—felt no dread.

O Purple Sea, beyond the stress of storms,
Where never ripple breaks upon the shore
Of Death's pale Isles of Twilight as they dream,

Give back, give back, O Sea of Nevermore,
The frailest of the unsubstantial forms
Who leave the shores that are for those that seem!

XIV.

O brook that fell too soon into the sea,
That never mingled with the broader streams,
To roll through mighty cities, where the steams
Of vice and woe obscure the pageantry ;

Nor passed where glorious summits, standing free,
Catch the full measure of the midday gleams ;
Nor crossed the Gorges of the Evil Dreams,
And Valley of the Hopes that May not Be :

We went beside it for a little while,
Watching its play, the ripple of its smile,
Its babble as it wandered on its way ;

And lo, its course was run, and it was lost,
As quickly as an evanescent frost,
In Death's dim Ocean that before us lay.

XV.

How patiently they did their work of old,
Those cowled illuminators of the cells,
Painting their vellum from the small ribbed shells
That held the mystic carmine and the gold ;

Matching God's tints in every glowing fold,
In nimbus, wing, and robe ; and by their spells
Seizing the living glory in the wells
Of some great sunrise that His hand had scrolled.

They made immortal cherubs that retain,
In spite of Time and his effacing trace,
Their pristine loveliness from age to age ;

As Death, the cowled one, with his brush of pain,
Illuminates some lovely baby face
In sunrise tints on Memory's missal page.

XVI.

It is the season when the elves of Spring
Help up the first anemones that peep
Through the young corn, and rouse from out their sleep
The pale green hellebores for March to swing ;

Before they bid the field narcissus fling
Its perfume on the furrows that they keep,
Or let the wild red tulip's flame upleap
In honour of great April's Fairy King.

O God, to think that in a spring or two
When she had learnt to run, we were to stroll
Among the fields where work the busy elves,

And see her pick the daffodils that strew
Each olive-planted terrace and sweet knoll,
And the wild tulips on the grassy shelves !

XVII.

Now Florence fills her lap with buds of May,
And all, with roses, be they rich or poor,
Stream through the great cathedral's brazen door,
To get them blessed upon the Roses' Day.

Roses and yet more roses, brought away
From hundreds of wild gardens, Spring's great store,
Are blessed; but, crushed on the cathedral floor,
Lies many a bud that caught the dawn's first ray.

And so we cried: "O Priest, a bud we'll bring
For thee to bless, fresh-sprinkled by the morn,
When myriad roses crown triumphant Spring.

Late to the breeze it came, through many a thorn,
On our grey villa wall, a frail sweet thing,
Of sun and rain, of smile and sorrow born."

XVIII.

O pale pressed Rose-bud in the Book of Death,
Where thou outbloomest many a perfect rose
That strews her petals at her full life's close
Beneath November's violating breath ;

Too well thou heardest what the Spring wind saith
To the small buds of which the gods compose
Their fatal wreaths, and what May sings to those
That shall not hear what Autumn uttereth.

When Azraël turns slowly one by one
The leaves of his great Book, by pale gleam lit,
And sees thee whom he plucked by morn's bright sun,

Perhaps, O Rose-bud, in that silent place,
A wistful smile, as of regret, may flit
O'er his inscrutable angelic face.

XIX.

We search the darkness from the villa's height,
Guessing where cupola and dome and spire
Of Florence lie ; till eyes begin to tire
'Mid the illusive shadows of the night.

Then suddenly there sparkles into sight
A mighty dome, rimmed round in points of fire,
Its segments outlined as by glowing wire ;
And fairy towers follow, fiery bright.

An evanescent city built of stars,
The fair illumination of an hour,
Born of the night, and quenched before the dawn ;

Like the bright dream on Life's horizon bars
That held us for a moment in its power,
Ere Death's dark curtain over it was drawn.

XX.

Do you remember how, with Fancy's hand,
We shaped her future as in living clay;
Modelled her life, and saw the child display
Each day fresh charm, and beauty's lines expand?

And how, before our love could understand
What Fate was working, lo, we found one day
The image finished as but God's hand may;
And it was Death's chill marble that we scann'd?

How well I see her on her cold white bed,
Between the branch of olive and the palm,
The little cross of pearls upon her breast;

And oh, the frozen beauty of the head,
The clear-cut lips, interminably calm,
The eyelids sealed in pale seraphic rest!

XXI.

I pass the Innocenti * in the square
That Ferdinand eternally rides through
In bronze on his bronze steed ;—where, white on blue,
Stand the swathed babies made of Robbia ware ;

Babies that brave the centuries ;—still fair
Up high on their round discs ; that never drew
With woman's milk pain's certainty, nor knew
Life's joy and woe, its triumph, its despair.

What of the real living babes within ;—
Some carved by Love, the Lord of Careless Years,
And many by the leering sculptor Sin ;

Some fair enough, and others that appal ;
Modelled in clay of sorrow, damped with tears,
And left for Death to play with, one and all ?

* The great Foundling Hospital of Florence.

XXII.

Of old the shuddering mother rang a bell,
And laid, by night, the babe she loathed or feared
In a small crib that suddenly appeared
From out the wall, and vanished as by spell,

While high above her, shrined in azure shell,
With one dim lamp, the Mother that has heard
Uncounted orisons for babe conferred
Smiled on Her aureoled Child where faint light fell.

O irony—that mother's hand should throw
Her unweaned offspring, like a thing that's dead,
Into that gulf of namelessness and woe,

When we, resisting the remorseless Powers
That lay their leaguer round a baby's bed,
Fought inch by inch to save the smile of ours!

XXIII.

Do you recall the scents, the insect whirr,
Where we had laid her in the chestnut shade?
How discs of sunlight through the bright leaves played
Upon the grass, as we bent over her?

How roving breezes made the bracken stir
Beside her, while the bumble-bee, arrayed
In brown and gold, hummed round her, and the glade
Was strewn with last year's chestnuts' prickly fur?

There in the forest's ripe and fragrant heat
She lay and laughed, and kicked her wee bare feet,
And stretched wee hands to grasp some woodland bell;

And played her little games; and when we said
"Cuckoo," would lift her frock, and hide her head,
Which now, God knows, is hidden but too well.

XXIV.

We walk by Shelley's sea, upon the sands
Where he was cast, whom Air, and Earth, and Brine
Gave up to Flame—their brother more divine—
Who held him in his hundred fluttering hands;

And gaze where in the cloudless heaven stands
Carrara's jagged purple mountain line,
Snow-sprinkled, over tufted woods of pine
That stretch away in bright green sunlit bands.

The children with their sunburnt naked feet,
Ripple-pursued, with laughter and shrill cry
Play in and out, where land and water meet.

So once we thought, O Mimma, thou wouldst play;
Forgetful of how dumb the threat can lie,
As in yon guilty depths, all sun to-day.

XXV.

O little ship that passed us in the night,
What sunrise wast thou bound for, as we sailed
Our longer voyage in the wind that wailed,
Across dark waves, with few great stars in sight ?

Or wast thou bound for where, in dim half-light,
The Isles-that-None-Return-From lie thick-veiled
In their eternal mist ; and, shrunk and paled,
The sun of Ghostland shines from changeless height ?

We had but time to hail and ask her name.
It sounded faint, like "Persis," and we heard
"God's haven" as the port from which she came ;

Bound for . . . But in the sobbing of the wind,
And clash of waves, we failed to catch the word,
And she was gone ; and we were left behind.

XXVI.

Lo, through the open window of the room
That was her nursery, a small bright spark
Comes wandering in, as falls the summer dark,
And with a measured flight explores the gloom,

As if it sought, among the things that loom
Vague in the dusk, for some familiar mark,
And like a light on some wee unseen bark,
It tacks in search of who knows what or whom?

I know 'tis but a fire-fly; yet its flight,
So straight, so measured, round the empty bed,
Might be a little soul's that night sets free;

And as it nears, I feel my heart grow tight
With something like a superstitious dread,
And watch it breathless, lest it should be she.

XXVII.

Once, breaking open an Etruscan tomb,
Men came upon a figure, lying there
In seeming sleep, pale, young, and very fair,
Wearing a small gold locket in the gloom.

But scarce the breeze had filled the buried room,
The form fell in : robe, pallid cheek, and hair
Turned to white ash beneath the newer air ;
And on that ash they saw the gold still loom.

So Mimma Bella for a moment passed
Before us like a vision ; then was snatched
Back into night, and vanished in Death's cold.

But, as in Grief's dim sepulchre we watched
Her beauty's crumbling ash that whitened fast,
Lo, the faint gleam of uncorroded gold.

XXVIII.

What alchemy is thine, O little Child,
Transmuting all our thoughts, thou that art dead,
And making gold of all the dross of lead
That leaves the soul's pure crucible defiled;

A vaporous gold, which I would fain have piled
Upon my palette, and with light brush spread
On Death's dark background, that thy baby head
Might wear a nimbus where the angels smiled?

Thus had I given back what thou hast wrought
In my own soul, and placed thee high among
The cherubs that are aureoled in glow;

Rimming thy brow with fine red gold of thought,
In such fair pictures as the English tongue
Shrines in its sanctuaries while ages flow.

XXIX.

What essences from Idumean palm,
What ambergris, what sacerdotal wine,
What Arab myrrh, what spikenard would be thine,
If I could swathe thy memory in such balm !

O for wrecked gold, from depths for ever calm,
To fashion for thy name a fretted shrine ;
O for strange gems, still locked in virgin mine,
To stud the pyx, where thought would bring sweet psalm !

I have but this small rosary of rhyme,—
No rubies but heart's drops, no pearls but tears,
To lay upon the altar of thy name,

O Mimma Bella ;—on the shrine that Time
Makes ever holier for the soul, while years
Obliterate the roll of human fame.

LAST SONNETS.

I.
The Black Caravan.

The desert. Sand and salt. The fall of night.
And suddenly you see a long-drawn string
Of coffin-laden camels, hurrying
Across the waste of thirst in the dim light.

And swerving wide, you shudder from the sight,
As you'd shrink back from some ill-omened thing,
While pass the captives of the Shadowy King,
Who thirst no more, no more look left or right.

So, sometimes in the Desert of the Years
A ghostly train, a convoy of the Dead,
In a soul's twilight suddenly appears;

Dead aims and dead ideals, once athirst
For Life's bright wells; now stark and dumb and dread,
And wrapped in horror, like a thing accurst.

II.
Purple Shadows.

We stand upon the terrace, looking down
On Florence, that the sunset rays have kissed,
And that is robing in her purple mist
As the slow daylight wanes upon the town;
While her great dome, in deeper purple shown,
Seems, for a moment, built of amethyst,
Ere blending with the shadows that insist,
And with the hills that Evening makes his own.

Then out of the still city, as it looms
Dreamy and restful, suddenly there booms
The deep reverberation of a bell;
Recalling what the unrelenting year
Has swept away, of lives that were too dear,
And sounding their illimitable knell.

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